Social Mobility and Social Inequality: The Ambivalence of the Middle Class

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Abstract

In following the lead of Savage and his associates, who unpack the ambivalent nature of class identities, this paper draws on narratives of seventy-three middle-class respondents in post-war Hong Kong to illustrate that pacifying effects of social mobility could operate through a sense of ambivalence. Moving into a newly emerging middle class, my respondents applied such class label to themselves; recognising their relocation, the respondents attributed their successes to their talents and efforts and thus embraced an achievement ideology – the Hong Kong dream – and viewed themselves as deserving members of the middle class. At the same time, they were ambivalent about the ideology, manifested in their sympathy with their parents' structural failures and their anxiety about their children's future. Yet, their ambivalence did not mean to challenge the ideology but served to confirm that my respondents deserved a middle-class position and to show that they were sympathetic individuals and good parents.

Keywords: Ambivalence; Hong Kong Dream; Middle Class; Class Identity; Social Mobility

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Introduction

1.1 The last few decades have seen a considerable number of mobility studies documenting mobility patterns for many industrial-capitalist societies in the West (e.g. Ganzeboom et al. 1989; Treiman and Ganzeboom 1990; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; cf. Ganzeboom et al. 1991). What is noticeable is that social mobility and social inequality are found to coexist side by side in many industrial-capitalist societies. On the one hand, because of structural changes, the extent to which people experience mobility, upward or downward, changes over time across societies. For example, right after the Second World War, partly because of economic boom, many people in many industrial-capitalist societies, albeit to a different extent, experienced upward mobility; in contrast, in part because of economic restructuring, since the 1990s, many people complained that their opportunities for upward mobility were blocked. However, on the other hand, despite variations in social mobility due to structural changes over time across societies, a class gap in mobility opportunity which could be measured in terms of odds ratios referring to chances of people of a particular class reaching a certain position rather than another position relative to people of a different class, be it widening or fluctuating, is found to persist in major industrial-capitalist societies (see classic studies over the last four decades quoted in Hout and DiPrete 2006 and also a summary there on the debate over whether such changes in class gap follow a particular trend – i.e. the gap getting smaller or bigger – or whether the changes in class gap are trendless). That is to say, whereas structural changes provide people of all classes with mobility opportunities for getting a better class position, such chances have remained greater for people of an advantaged-class origin than for their disadvantaged-class counterparts. At first glance, it seems rather puzzling to observe the coexistence of variations in mobility rates and the persistence of inequality in mobility opportunity. But, the distinction of two types of mobility (thus mobility rates) is of insight in making sense of this puzzling observation. The first is structural mobility: it refers to mobility resulting from changes in social structure and is reflected in absolute mobility rates. The second is circulation mobility: it refers to mobility resulting from changes in social openness and is reflected in relative mobility rates. Some researchers, then, focus on the fact that relative mobility rates remain more or less the same, which implies the persistence of a class gap, and use such fact to argue that contrary to the prediction of the logic of industrialism, meritocracy does not come with industrialisation (e.g. Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). In contrast, other researchers suggest that the focus be on the fact that absolute mobility rates indeed vary, rather than on the persistence of a class gap, and argue that this very fact could be interpreted as support for meritocracy (e.g. Saunders 1995, 1997). Regardless of their disagreement over whether we should focus on relative or absolute mobility rates, what is of theoretical and political

concern is that the coexistence of social mobility and social inequality requires us to take seriously Parkin's (1971) view that pacifying effects of mobility could serve as a source of stability of political order (cf. Lockwood 1966; Goldthorpe et al. 1968; Kiecolt 1988).

1.2 Over these years many scholars have proposed a number of concepts and mechanisms to illustrate pacifying effects of upward mobility. As an example, the concept of 'class identity' has been used to make sense of the situation in Britain; some scholars suspect that the upwardly mobile would change their class identity, either to disassociate from the working class or to assimilate into the middle class (cf. Coxon and Jones 1975; Hopper 1981; cf. Bottero 2005). This concept is perhaps of particular relevance when a class structure is relatively well established; but its relevance would be in doubt in a context where its class structure is still in the making. As in the case of the US, some scholars employ the concept of 'achievement ideology' to argue that the prevalence of upward mobility gives rise to an achievement ideology – the American Dream – which, in turn, is used to justify the existing system of political and social inequality as meritocratic (e.g. Kingston 2006; cf. Rytina et al. 1970; Della Fave 1974). Despite their differences, both the Britain and the US cases could be seen as in line with Parkin's view that the socially mobile, given their relocation, would come to re-define their selves (cf. Featherman and Haller 2007). Yet, these two approaches to social mobility seem to hold an assumption similar to that underlying a mechanistic or social determinist approach to class identity: that is, the socially mobile will take up automatically a particular identity or worldview determined either by their old class position or their new one. But, what has been emerging from the existing studies on subjective accounts of social mobility is a sense of ambivalence: many of the upwardly mobile hold a rather ambivalent view on their relocation and some even feel being caught between the two worlds. For example, what Jackson and Marsden (1962) argue in their classic study in Britain is that upward mobility could be a mixed blessing. And, consistent with the hidden injuries of class that Sennett and Cobb (1973) explore, many of the upwardly mobile, despite feeling pride of their achievements, are found to report guilt, shame, anxiety, or a mixture of all: some feel guilty about betraying their class origin, some ashamed of their humble origins, and others anxious about being found out (e.g. Dews and Law 1995; Ryan and Sackrey 1996; cf. Reay 2005; Sayer 2005). In short, agency should not be ignored in approaching mobility and thus class identity. But, it does not imply that we should shift from a social determinist approach to a rather individualistic approach, thus rendering class as dated in our understanding of mobility and identity. There were debates over the salience and relevance of 'class identity' in class analysis, especially in relation to class politics, in post-industrial societies (e.g. Clark and Lipset 2001). A suggestion by Savage and his associates (2001) is of particular relevance here: in approaching class identity, we should move beyond two rather simplistic formulations – individualisation or social determination – and focus on the ambivalent nature of class identities. This suggestion, I believe, could revitalise our discussion over class identity and provide a new line of inquiry in class analysis (cf. Devine et al 2005). And, what has been under discussion is how ambivalent class identities could be understood. While Skeggs (1997) shows that the ambivalence (or dis-identification) of her working-class women respondents in the North West of England could be used as a defensive strategy to avoid facing up to class but to preserve their respectability, Savage and his associates (2001) illustrate that the ambivalence of their respondents in the Manchester area could be seen as an evasive strategy to avoid social fixing. Taking this insight into account, we could interpret a sense of ambivalence detected from the socially mobile in the existing studies as not simply a kind of emotion, but a strategy of some kind.

1.3 Put simply, mobility could lead to a re-definition of one's self; therefore, mobility could be seen as part of identity formation process (e.g. Muller 1973) and a mobility account as a narration of relocation (Savage et al. 2004; cf. Pahl 1995). In order to understand pacifying effects of upward mobility, which could enable us to make a better sense of the coexistence of social mobility and social inequality, it is absolutely crucial to tap into the subjective dimension of the accounts of the socially mobile so as to examine how they make sense of their relocation and to explore how a sense of ambivalence operates in their stories of (re)location. The theme of ambivalence has been drawn mostly from evidence about Britain and the US. Then, how relevant is this theme to our understanding of non-western industrial-capitalist societies, such as newly industrialising societies in Asia? Could we learn more about the ambivalence of the socially mobile from a non-western case (cf. Hsiao 1999)? How different and how similar is a sense of ambivalence manifested in a non-western context vis-à-vis a western one? Post-war Hong Kong as a newly industrialising society could serve as an example. Referring to their narratives, this paper seeks to examine the subjective evaluations on mobility experiences of the middle class in post-war Hong Kong. In what follows, I shall first provide a brief description of the background of this study: a report on the research design of this study, including the recruitment of respondents, and an overview of the historical and social context of post-war Hong Kong. Then, I shall discuss how my respondents evaluated their mobility experiences and unpack a sense of ambivalence they conveyed in their narratives. In doing so, I shall highlight the generality and specificity of the case of Hong Kong vis-à-vis its western counterparts.

Background: research design and the context of the study

2.1 As was the case in many industrial-capitalist societies, social mobility and social inequality coexisted side by side in post-war Hong Kong: over the same period of time, on the one hand, a class gap persisted, while on the other hand, structural changes led many people to become upwardly mobile (Chan 1994). In particular, the rapid expansion of the professional, managerial, and administrative sector brought people with an abundance of newly available middle-class positions. The major concern of this paper is this: how do the middle class evaluate their mobility experiences? Would those of a disadvantaged-class origin see their mobility differently from their advantaged-class counterparts? Do they display a sense of ambivalence in their evaluations? And, if yes, how could we make sense of their ambivalence in their narratives of relocation? This paper drew on part of the data from a qualitative mobility study of post-war Hong Kong to address these issues. The qualitative study [1] primarily sought to examine how individuals of different class backgrounds in post-war Hong Kong secured a professional, managerial, or administrative middle-class occupation, a socially desirable position at the time. In operational terms, the study was about the mobility of teachers and managers, two occupational groups of middle-class employees in Goldthorpe class scheme (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). These two occupational groups were chosen because of their non-specificity vis-à-vis other middle-class occupations. Unlike many specific middle-class occupations which could only be found in either Class I or Class II of the scheme, such as lawyers (Class I) or social workers (Class II), teachers and managers are two rather broad categories covering a wider range of occupations from both Class I (lecturers at university or CEOs in an international corporation) and Class II (teachers in primary school or managers in a small firm). Therefore, mobility experiences of teachers and managers are believed to be rather representative as to reflecting the general experience of the middle class (Classes I and II).

2.2 In practice, I sought to recruit teachers or managers who at least had one child aged six or above [2] and their spouses through formal and informal channels. Regarding formal channels, I sent recruitment letters to a number of firms, banks, organisations, secondary schools, tertiary institutions, and universities; but only three respondents were recruited. Regarding informal channels, basically I exploited my social networks: I invited some former-teachers of mine, parents of some former-schoolmates, and parents of some of my former-students whom I gave private tutorials to be interviewed. But, after all, I came from a relatively disadvantaged class origin, where my self-employed parents ran a small shop with us children (Class IVb, see below), and I was a young and single PhD student at the time; I did not know many middle-class parents, let alone those having at least one child aged six or above. So, I decided to be thick-skinned to contact even acquaintances I met when I did my bachelor's and master's degrees at a local elite university so as to use their social networks for recruitment. Perhaps my recruitment experience – relying on weak social ties – could also be seen as an illustration of how class matters (cf. Granovettor 1995). While most respondents were recruited through informal channels, four respondents were recruited through the further introduction of some interviewed respondents. In the end, parents of forty-nine families were recruited; given that spouses of nine respondents declined to be interviewed, my sample consisted of eighty-nine respondents. Among them, forty-three were teachers and thirty managers; the other sixteen respondents were spouses of either teachers or managers having other occupations. I conducted taped interviews with respondents between September 1996 and August 1997. Most of the taped interviews took about an hour, ranging from forty-five minutes to two-and-half hours. They were then transcribed and translated to English from Cantonese, the major local dialect in Hong Kong. This paper will refer to the data on the intergenerational comparison and evaluation of mobility experiences by seventy-three respondents (forty-three teachers and thirty managers), and report mainly the following thematic analyses: how the respondents accounted for their achievements; how they evaluated Hong Kong as a place for career development; how they compared their mobility experiences with their parents' and with their siblings'; and, how they planned for their children's future.

2.3 My respondents were middle-aged (about forty-five years old, born after the Second World War) middle-class parents, mostly having two children. Most of the respondents were born in Hong Kong and received at least a local senior secondary education. While recruiting these seventy-three respondents by their current occupation, I classified them by their class origin in my analysis. Whereas they all belonged to Classes I and II of Goldthorpe class scheme by their occupation, they came from rather diverse social backgrounds in that their fathers were found in all seven classes of the class scheme. As will be shortly described below, the social structure and class structure of Hong Kong were under rapid changes in post-war Hong Kong; in particular, a new class of professionals, managers, and administrators – equivalent to the middle class in the West – began to emerge in Hong Kong of the 1970s and 1980s. In order to capture the social rankings of different class positions in two periods, I applied a revised version of Goldthorpe class scheme to classify fathers of respondents vis-à-vis the respondents themselves, which was not an unusual practice in mobility studies (cf. Breen 2004). Given that a local middle class just firstly emerged in the late 1970s, all respondents could surely be seen as mobile in that they entered the middle class from different class origins; in fact, most of them also saw themselves that way. But, for the present purposes, this paper will divide seventy-three respondents into the upwardly mobile and the immobile and then compare their mobility accounts along the above-mentioned themes. The immobile referred to thirty-four respondents

coming from a relatively advantaged class (Class I or II or III or IVa) and the upwardly mobile referred to thirty-nine respondents coming from a relatively disadvantaged class (Class IVb or V or VI or VII). More specifically, of the thirty-four immobile respondents, two respondents' fathers were employers of Class I (large proprietors running a large-scale business), five respondents' fathers were employees of Classes I and II (professionals, managers, or administrators), thirteen respondents' fathers were in Class III (so-called white-collar workers in the non-manual sectors such as clerks, salespersons, and merchandisers), [3] and fourteen respondents' fathers were in Class IVa (small employers running a small business). [4] And, of the thirty-nine upwardly mobile respondents, nine respondents' fathers were in Class IVb (the self-employed, such as street vendors, craftsmen, and taxi drivers) and thirty respondents' fathers were in the working class sector: Class V (foremen or supervisors in the manual sector), or Classes VI and VII (skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled workers such as factory workers, cleaners, bus drivers, and tram drivers).

2.4 Most respondents grew up in Hong Kong of the 1950s and 1960s, when it was poor and underdeveloped in many aspects. The great majority of people lived from hand to mouth (Hambro 1955). [5] Although the economy took off in the late 1960s, the provision of social services was still woefully inadequate in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, basic education was not free or universal before the late 1970s; child labour was not uncommon. The manufacturing sector, because of industrialisation that began around the 1950s, expanded in the 1960s and 1970s. From the 1970s onwards, whereas the manufacturing sector has been shrinking, the service sector has expanded rapidly creating a large number of professional, managerial, or administrative middle-class occupations. The colonial Hong Kong British government also played a part in its expansion. The class structure of early Hong Kong consisted of three main strata: the British ruling class at the top, the mass Chinese at the bottom, and a small number of local Chinese bilingual elites in the middle serving to help the ruling class rule the colony (cf. Chan 1991). And, most of the mass Chinese were not born in Hong Kong but came to Hong Kong from somewhere; they basically saw themselves as passers-by in Hong Kong. In a sense, a so-called local middle class, statistically, did not exist. But, during the 1960s and 1970s, many people realised that they could leave for nowhere and then decided to get settled in Hong Kong. Around the same time, for various reasons the colonial Hong Kong British government made some positions, especially junior ones, in the bureaucracy of civil service open to local Chinese people (Carroll 2007; cf. Faure 2003). As a result of such economic and political changes in the 1960s and 1970s, the proportion of working population having a professional, administrative, or managerial job was increased more than threefold from 8.2% in 1961 to 29.2% in 1996.

2.5 In short, such structural expansion in that period of Hong Kong led to the availability of an increasing number of professional, managerial, or administrative occupations to baby-boomers with at least a senior secondary education (cf. Chan 1994). My respondents were one of those baby-boomers who succeeded in obtaining such middle-class positions. Three common paths leading to such occupations were identified. First was a professional path, taking up such a lower-level professional first job as nurse, school teacher, or social worker and getting promoted within the profession; all teacher respondents followed this path. Second was a bureaucratic path, starting as a junior civil servant and getting promoted to become an administrator within the bureaucracy of civil service; nearly all manager respondents working in the public sector followed this path. And third was a managerial path, beginning as a junior clerk in an international corporation and getting promoted to become a manager either in the same corporation or in a new one; many manager respondents working in the private sector followed this path. Given that only about one-tenth of the population aged fifteen or above completed a secondary education people in the early 1970s and therefore people with a senior secondary education were in short supply, some people without such a qualification could still get a professional, managerial, or administrative occupation, albeit taking a more indirect route, as in the cases of Mr. Wan [6] and Mr. Kwok. Against this context, demographically speaking, a new class of professional, managerial, and administrative employees – a local counterpart of the middle class in the West – became socially visible in Hong Kong of the early 1980s. Indeed it was regarded as the first-generation local middle class.

2.6 Before moving on to discuss the evaluations of my respondents, I would like to draw readers' attention to the fact that data for this paper were derived from a retrospective study of a small non-random sample of self-selected teachers or managers, implying that by design their mobility accounts had two major in-built limitations. First, these accounts are partial. When asked to look back on the past, respondents may fail to recall accurately what happened or they may even select apposite episodes to rationalise what they did. Second, these accounts are statistically unrepresentative. Respondents were not selected in random but recruited basically through my social networks, although they had to meet the set criteria. However, these limitations, I believe, do not make their accounts, however partial and statistically unrepresentative, less insightful in enabling us to understand how they make sense of their relocation or to explore how a sense of ambivalence operates in their narratives of relocation.

Pacifying effects of social mobility operate through a sense of ambivalence

3.1 In line with the view that class remained relevant to understanding the identity of individuals in industrial societies, what was clear in the narratives of my respondents was that class provided them with a number of anchor points (cf. Savage et al. 2001). For example, as with sociologists, all respondents recognised that they were then middle-class parents. And, perhaps because the class structure was under rapid changes in that period of Hong Kong, some respondents referred to the class structure in ancient China in narrating how they began their mobility trajectory. Yet, I do not mean to say that my respondents have definite ideas about class, as Bourdieu (1984) would argue. What was striking was that my respondents clearly conveyed in their narratives a sense that they deserved their current middle-class position. When asked to explain their achievements (including obtaining a relatively high level of qualification, a relatively advantaged first job, and subsequent job promotions), without exception all respondents considered their talents and efforts to be of utmost importance.

3.2 Nevertheless, there is some subtle difference between the upwardly mobile and the immobile. The immobile seemed to take their achievements for granted: they said that they just did what their parents expected of them and that they just did what many other people did. In their narratives, despite saying that they were capable and worked very hard, they did not see themselves as extraordinary but ordinary enough to succeed in achieving what was considered socially desirable. In short, to them, it was nothing special but expected or simply 'normal' that they attained a relatively high level of education, that they obtained a relatively advantaged first job, and that they were eventually promoted to their current well-paid prestigious middle-class occupation. Indeed, usually the immobile were not the only ones in their family to follow such a path to get into the middle class; most of their siblings also did the same (Wong 2005). In a way, in the words of Ball and his associates (2002), the accounts of the immobile could be described as 'a normal biography.' And, the sense of 'ordinariness' expressed by the immobile somehow echoes a sense of entitlement emerged from the narratives of middle-class respondents in Lareau's study (2002): the immobile somehow see that they are entitled to be in the middle class. In contrast to the immobile, the upwardly mobile did not take their achievements for granted. Their accounts could be called as 'a choice biography,' again in the words of Ball and his associates (2002), in that the upwardly mobile all described in detail how they made choices and overcame obstacles at each stage and thus got from one stage to the next. In addition, unlike the immobile, the upwardly mobile were usually in the minority, if not the only children, in their families who succeeded in getting this far. It was not uncommon to hear the upwardly mobile say that their talents and efforts made them stand out from the crowd and distinguished them from their siblings. Put simply, they saw themselves as extraordinary and their achievements as hard-won; being able to cross the 'class border,' they were seen as a source of family pride, as Mrs. Chin and Mrs. Fan expressed:

> 'I am the first of my clan group who could get such a privileged white-collar job: working in the well-respected teaching profession. … My mother is so very proud of me. … Whenever my relatives have problems, they would turn to me for comments and suggestions for I am the best-educated person within my social circle. My relatives do not know anyone working in the white-collar sector, let alone the teaching profession.' (Mrs. Chin, primary school principal, upwardly mobile)

> 'Our family was as poor as many families in that period of Hong Kong. … My father had no education and did not know what constituted a good job. … He just wanted me to obtain a higher qualification so as to get a white-collar job. … He said a factory-worker's life was very tough; he didn't want me to be a blue-collar worker. He wanted me to get out of poverty and have a future. … Unlike many children living in my neighbourhood, who then worked in factories, I got into university and became a secondary school teacher. ... And my talents and efforts finally pay off. My father is so proud of me being able to cross the border.' (Mrs. Fan, university lecturer, upwardly mobile)

3.3 In brief, both the immobile and the upwardly mobile consider that they deserve a place in the middle class because of their ability and efforts, and that if an individual is more talented and works much harder, it is fair that they get more. Their reasoning is consistent with Saunders's argument (1996) that meritocracy could sit comfortably with inequality, in that if more of advantaged-class individuals are talented and hardworking vis-à-vis their disadvantaged-class counterparts, then we could expect that more of the former achieve a socially desirable mobility outcome. Yet, what could be an issue here is this. As I also discussed elsewhere (Wong 2005), the upwardly mobile reported more obstacles in making educational and career advancement than the immobile. This finding is not surprising but consistent with the following general finding reported in many quantitative mobility studies: in obtaining a similar level of education and an occupation of a similar kind, given their class barriers, individuals of a disadvantaged-class origin had to be more talented and to work much harder than their advantaged-class counterparts (cf. Marshall et al. 1997). In other words, this finding could be interpreted as a challenge to Saunders's (1996) sense of fairness involved in explaining inequality: when individuals of different class origins are not competing on an equal footing, can we still regard such social competition as fair?

3.4 Despite their different starting points, given their achievements, the upwardly mobile did not seem to care much about the fairness of social competition. Rather, their overall comments of their career successes were similar to those of the immobile: both the immobile and the upwardly mobile proudly summarised that they were a self-made generation who made their ways all by themselves. What recurred in the interview with each respondent was their belief that in Hong Kong there was a formula of success applicable to everyone. The following quotation was an example:

> 'There are no social constraints for your development (in Hong Kong), … it is a free place for you to develop. Only if you are bold enough, Hong Kong is the best place for development for there are so many opportunities here. Take my previous boss as an example. He was a low-rank employee in a small company. But he was bold and assertive. Of course he also had capital. He started his business that keeps expanding to the present scale. So I think Hong Kong is good for career development only if, first, you are bold, and second, you have knowledge. And I think boldness is more important than having knowledge.' (Mr. Har, manager, immobile)

3.5 In other words, based on their career successes, my respondents tried to make generalisations about Hong Kong as a place for career development and ended their narratives with a note on the so-called 'Hong Kong dream.' Such dream is a belief that Hong Kong is a land of opportunities and that one will succeed only if one is talented and hardworking. There is no formal documentation of the exact timing for the emergence of this belief. But the term 'Hong Kong dream' was probably coined after the publication of one research finding of a local survey (Lau and Kuan 1988): the term was used to capture a discrepancy between general optimism and personal pessimism about social openness in Hong Kong (cf. Wong and Lui 2000). On the one hand, respondents of that survey were well aware of the existence of inequality in Hong Kong and they were rather pessimistic about their own personal future: they did not see how they could get ahead. However, on the other hand, given the visibility of the success of the first-generation local middle class, including that of my respondents, the respondents of that survey at the same time believed that it was possible for some select talented and hardworking people to get ahead in Hong Kong and that Hong Kong was a land of opportunities. Perhaps, what this discrepancy reveals is an attitude held by the general public similar to that underlying the American Dream: if failing to get ahead, individuals believe that they have only themselves rather than social structure to blame. In a way, the 'Hong Kong dream' could be seen as providing an illustration of how pacifying effects of social mobility operate: as long as the general public believe that there is a possibility for upward mobility, even for very few select people only, they would accept the existing social hierarchy.

3.6 In contrast to the 1980s, the late 1990s saw the Hong Kong economy take for a worse turn. In fact, since the 1997 handover, the general public have discussed more and more heatedly about the impact of economic restructuring on poverty and structural unemployment and demanded for policy change. In response, the government has deliberately manipulated 'the Hong Kong dream' to boost societal morale during economic hard times, such as the 1997 Asian crisis, SARS in 2003, and the recent global financial tsunami in 2008 (cf. Carroll 2007). And this belief has dominated the social discourse. In other words, contrary to the dominant ideology thesis proposed by some Marxists, the Hong Kong case shows that a dominant ideology – the 'Hong Kong dream' – is not necessarily fabricated by the (dominant) ruling class to fool the general public (cf. Abercrombie et al. 1980, 1990); but, it could be created by the (dominated) ruled and manipulated by the ruling class to their interest.

3.7 What underscored the accounts of my respondents' 'Hong Kong dream' was a sense of pride. A sense of pride was clearly conveyed when the respondents talked unanimously about how they overcame obstacles, one after another, in getting ahead. It was particularly true of the upwardly mobile. What is so distinctive about the upwardly mobile in post-war Hong Kong is that their pride is not mixed with a kind of guilt, shame, or anxiety that has been reported for the US and UK. Unlike the British working class, the upwardly mobile did not feel guilty about betraying their class origin. Quite the contrary, they were happy to get out of poverty and also to leave their class origin. Unlike the American working class, the upwardly mobile did not feel ashamed of their origin or anxious about being found out. To the contrary, they were proud to let people know that they came from a humble origin and that they were able to leave it and move upwards. There could be two plausible interpretations of this difference between Hong Kong and its western counterparts. First, the class structure of Hong Kong was not well established but was under rapid changes in that period. To reiterate, in that period, the mass Chinese were at the bottom while only very few Chinese elites in the middle helped the ruling British to govern. In contrast to its western counterparts, an established working class or middle class did not exist in Hong Kong; loyalty to and, for that matter, betrayal of the so-called working-class culture as well as aspiration to the so-called middle-class culture were of irrelevance. In this sense, one could argue that there was simply no class culture for any one to

aspire to; neither was there a class culture to betray or to be ashamed of. But this did not imply that my respondents found class irrelevant. Instead, as was made clear at the beginning, class provided my respondents with anchor points in their narratives. In positioning themselves, some respondents even referred to a four-stratum class structure in ancient China, when it was ruled by the Han-Chinese: scholars at the top, farmers the second, craftsmen the third, and merchants at the bottom. In ancient China, scholarship as a mobility channel was open to all. Basically there was no class baggage for those who succeeded in leaving their humble class origin; an ability to leave for a better class was generally considered admirable (e.g. Ho 1976). All these then bring us to the second plausible interpretation. Unlike its western counterparts, Chinese people in Hong Kong simply did not have psychological resistance to taking education as a legitimate mobility channel through which they could get out of poverty. Continuing Chinese pragmatism towards education, they took education instrumentally. Newly emerging middle-class positions were simply seen as desirable as well as superior in a changing social hierarchy (cf. Sayer 2005), while education was viewed as a legitimate and desirable means of obtaining a middle-class position. In short, the view that moving upwards within the existing social hierarchy through scholarship was admirable was commonly shared by Chinese people of all class origins in that period of Hong Kong. Against such a context, the deed of moving upwards per se had nothing to do guilt or shame or anxiety but was interpreted as a source of pride.

3.8 Being proud of their successes and telling their successes with a framework of the 'Hong Kong dream,' my respondents sought to convey a message that they deserved to be in the middle class. But, it did not mean that my respondents were not analytical or unable to see the simplicity of the 'Hong Kong dream.' Instead, most of them realised that talents and efforts alone did not necessarily make one a success; the availability of structural opportunities or even luck could play a role. As mentioned above, compared with the immobile, the upwardly immobile did not take their achievements for granted and thus felt more strongly about their mobility. I am not sure if that is a reason why the upwardly mobile seem more analytical than the immobile, in that the upwardly mobile usually take up more perspectives in accounting for their mobility. In particular, two upwardly mobile respondents, Mrs. Tung and Mr. Wu, even questioned whether they would have obtained such a middle-class occupation if structural opportunities had not been available to them. In line with Mitchell's (1972) sociological analysis of the role of formal qualification in a professional's career in that period of Hong Kong, Mrs. Tung (an inspector in the Education Bureau) pointed out that her entry to the teaching profession and her subsequent promotions in the Education Bureau were possible mainly because of the screening effect of a bachelor's degree for getting a well-paid prestigious middle-class occupation in Hong Kong of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Similarly, consistent with Abbott's (1995) vacancy chain thesis in explaining job promotion, Mr. Wu (a senior bank manager) also suggested that his promotions would have been impossible but for the 1997 faith crisis and thus the emigration of his senior colleagues. In addition to the availability of structural opportunities, at times during the interview, many respondents mentioned that luck, including luck of having opportunities popped up at different stages of their career, actually played a crucial role in their career advancement. Certainly, these responses could be interpreted as a possibility that some respondents did not want to claim too much credit for their successes but look modest and thus socially desirable to me, the researcher; after all, modesty was seen as a virtue in a Chinese context. But, their responses were in line with a suggestion made by Jencks and his associates (1972), who found that a huge amount of variance in one's class destination remained unexplained even when many factors such as class background, educational level, individual attitudes and efforts, and intelligence were taken into account: the role of pure luck should be explored further in the study of social mobility.

3.9 Despite their desire to convey that they are capable and industrious individuals and thus deserved a middle-class position, given their analytical ability, it was clear that my respondents did not wholeheartedly believe that what counted in one's success were talents and efforts. Their narratives were underscored by a touch of ambivalence about such a belief (Savage et al. 2001; cf. Skeggs 1997). Their ambivalence became even clearer when my respondents referred to structural differences rather than individual differences in comparing their achievements with those of their parents. When asked how they would compare their mobility experiences with those of their parents, nearly all respondents immediately mentioned that they did much better than their parents in an economic sense: they enjoyed much higher living standards than their parents. Except for this similarity, a slight difference was detected between the immobile and the upwardly mobile. The upwardly mobile emphasized that they outperformed their parents in every aspect: compared with their parents, they had a much higher pay job, with much better benefits and much shorter working hours; they enjoyed much higher job prestige; and, they were better educated and more cultivated. In short, they regarded themselves as moving upwards in every sense of the word vis-à-vis their parents. Mr. Chiu's articulation was one example:

> 'You could say that my father and I are living in two totally different worlds. ... Society has changed. … What I do and earn now is entirely beyond my father's imagination. … Working so hard to sell vegetables on the street all his life, my father would have never dared to

> imagine that he could buy a flat like mine, for example. … Whereas he is illiterate, my father is very proud of his son being well-educated, having a well-respected prestigious occupation, and earning an admirable salary!' (Mr. Chiu, secondary school teacher, upwardly mobile)

3.10 While recognising the impact of societal affluence on their living standards and on that of their parents, the immobile, in contrast to the upwardly mobile, basically did not see substantial differences between themselves and their parents. Rather, consistent with what Goldthorpe and his associates (1987) reported for contemporary Britain, few immobile respondents whose fathers were large proprietors (Class I) or small employers (Class IVa) somehow felt that they were downwardly mobile doing much more poorly in an economic sense than their parents, as Mrs. Pak articulated:

> 'I don't see myself as successful. Having a secure and well-paid professional job, I won't be starved to death. … (B)ut there is no comparison with what my father has achieved. ... He has run so many different businesses and made so much money. … I think my father is disappointed with turning us into professionals. … He didn't anticipate that professionals would not become as rich as he had been.' (Mrs. Pak, secondary school teacher, immobile)

3.11 Put simply, most respondents, without exception, recognised the fact that their parents had achieved much less than did they in material terms not because their parents were stupid or lazy, but because their parents did not have the opportunities that the respondents have enjoyed. Their recognition could undoubtedly be interpreted as challenging or contradicting the respondents' proclaimed belief in talents and efforts constituting the formula of success in Hong Kong, and could thus be seen as their ambivalence about the 'Hong Kong dream.' It would be too simple to conclude that my respondents were just being contradictory. What is of concern is the message underlying their ambivalence. Their ambivalence, unlike that of Skeggs's (1997) white working-class women respondents, was not a defensive strategy to dis-identify with the emerging middle class; and, their ambivalence, unlike that of the respondents interviewed by Savage and his associates (2001), was not an evasive strategy to avoid social fixing. Quite the contrary, my respondents were proud of being able to get into the middle class. It did not immediately imply that my respondents had very clear and strong middle-class identity. Rather, seemingly they did not want to be pigeonholed as middle-class members of a particular type. Their ambivalence about the 'Hong Kong dream' precisely allowed them to send off such message. As tokens of proof of the 'Hong Kong dream' they were capable and industrious individuals and thus deserved a middle-class membership; yet, at the same time, they were analytical and thus understood that what made one a success were more than talents and efforts. So, their ambivalence could be seen as a strategy to portray them as a successful but sympathetic, rather than arrogant, middle-class member.

3.12 That my respondents wanted to portray themselves as successful individuals deserving a middle-class position was further manifested in the way how they compared themselves with their siblings. Admittedly, some respondents, upwardly mobile (Mr. Tung and Mr. Wu) or immobile (Mr. Dai and Mr. Law), took account of structural constraints and luck in their analyses and were rather sympathetic with their siblings who did not achieve as much as they did. Despite that, what my respondents had in common was their emphasis on individual differences in talents and efforts between them and their siblings. Some respondents, especially the upwardly mobile, were very harsh on their siblings, as Mr. Chung did:

> 'My father died when we were still small. … My elder brother being the eldest child was less lucky than I was; he had to quit school after secondary form five out of financial concerns. … But he was industrious and worked his way up becoming a pharmacist. Similarly, I studied very hard and finally succeeded in getting into the second university at the time. … My younger sister was so different from us. She was lazy and did not study hard to secure a place in education; she became a vendor. … You see, what counts is not one's background. … My elder brother and I made it despite our poverty; in contrast, my sister failed to do the same because she was lazy.' (Mr. Chung, secondary school teacher, upwardly mobile)

3.13 The reasoning of those who shared Mr. Chung's view was this: coming from the same family and thus the equally (dis)advantaged class, if I could succeed, why couldn't my siblings? In particular, the fact that the upwardly mobile succeeded in overcoming all the obstacles and finally made it proved them that it was possible to overcome class barriers; and therefore, the reason for their siblings' failures was that the siblings were not talented enough or did not work hard enough. But then, this kind of harsh individualistic account did not apply to the mobility of the children of my respondents. Instead of emphasising talents and

efforts, the respondents switched to a sympathetic tone stressing the importance of structural opportunities when talking about why they paved the way for their children and how they did it. The respondents were worried that the opportunities that they had enjoyed might no longer be available to their children. Anticipating that their children would be facing more severe social competition in the future, all respondents stressed the need for them as middle-class parents to do their best to work the system in order to enable their children to get ahead. More specifically, they all wanted their children to obtain at least a bachelor's degree and then to become a professional; they believed that such qualification and occupation would lead their children to a bright future. In order to achieve their identical expectations of their children, they used unanimously resources of various kinds to implement almost the same strategies for their children's education, as I reported elsewhere (Wong 2007). What they did for their children as to retaining class advantages over generations was an illustration of Parkin's (1974) concept of strategies of social closure, and echoed a suggestion that class be viewed not as a position or identity but as embodied practices and institutional processes that generate far-reaching inequality (Devine et al. 2005). Yet, compared with the immobile, the upwardly mobile stressed much more on class differences between two generations: the upwardly mobile as parents did much more for children than did their own parents while they as children benefited much less from parental assistance than did their own children. Such contrast could be seen in the following two quotations.

> 'I think, regardless of which generation, parents are the same; they give their children as much as they have. … Similarly, children are also the same; they should do as well as they could. … I don't really see the difference between what my parents did for me and what I do for my sons. We are both teachers disciplining children in a similar manner. … Likewise, I would expect my sons to do the same when they become parents. … Perhaps, the only difference was that my sons are luckier than I was in that I help my sons with their schoolwork whereas my parents never did.' (Mrs. Shek, primary school vice-principal, immobile)

> 'I planned everything and did everything for my children. … My mother was a cleaner and knew nothing about education. … In climbing up the social ladder, I have worked all by myself to reach where I am now. … And I don't want my children to repeat my hard time or to experience my setback. ... I pave the way for my children because I want them to have a smoother path and as an educated middle-class parent I am able to do that. … Despite that my mother did nothing for me, I still succeeded. So, given that I have done so much for my children, I don't see why my children would fail. … My daughter has been doing very well. But I am worried about my son. He took a resit last year. … I might consider sending him abroad if he fails again this year.' (Mrs. Chin, primary school principal, upwardly mobile)

3.14 This contrast lends further support to my view that the upwardly mobile feel more strongly about their relocation than the immobile. Despite their difference, the narratives of how the upwardly mobile and the immobile paved the way for their children were all underscored by a sense of worry, uncertainty, and anxiety: as with their western counterparts, despite doing their best for their children, and despite feeling hopeful about their strategies for their children's future, my respondents as middle-class parents recognised that their children could fail to get ahead (cf. Power at el. 2003). Somehow we could say that the worry, uncertainty, and anxiety of my respondents betrayed their genuine view of the 'Hong Kong dream': the respondents deep down had doubts about the 'Hong Kong dream' and thus the validity of the view that talents and efforts constituted the formula of success. Yet, on closer examination, their ambivalence shown here played a similar role to that of their ambivalence about the 'Hong Kong dream' shown in talking about their parents' achievement: it did not mean to challenge the 'Hong Kong dream' but served to portray them as sympathetic individuals; since the targets of their sympathy were their children, their ambivalence somehow was a strategy to portray my respondents as good – caring and thoughtful – parents doing all their best to secure a bright future for their children.

3.15 In sum, in accounting for their career successes, in evaluating the achievements of their parents and siblings, and in discussing their strategies for their children's future, my respondents switched back and forth between an individualistic approach and a structural one, showing their ambivalence about the 'Hong Kong dream.' Making use of the insights of Savage and his associates (2001), I have shown that their ambivalence is somehow coherent in its own term. On the one hand, they attributed their successes to their talents and efforts and blamed their siblings for failing to achieve as much as they did. On the other hand, they referred to societal poverty as structural constraints to excuse their parents for their under-achievement and they foresaw that severe social competition would pose structural obstacles to their children's mobility. Referring to their talents and efforts in explaining their successes, my respondents

embraced the 'Hong Kong dream' and portrayed themselves as deserving members of the middle class. Their individualistic accounts of their siblings' failures served not only as validations of the 'Hong Kong dream' but also as confirmation of the fact that my respondents were indeed talented and hardworking deserving a privileged middle-class position. Their structural accounts of their parents' under-achievements, despite subtly contradicting the 'Hong Kong dream,' showed that my respondents were analytical; and therefore, their ambivalence made them look sympathetic rather than arrogant middle-class members. And, their anxiety about their children's future, despite revealing their doubts about the Hong Kong dream, led my respondents to use unanimously strategies (of social closure) for their children's future, thus somehow reinforcing or mystifying the 'Hong Kong dream;' and therefore, their ambivalence portrayed my respondents as caring and thoughtful parents.

Conclusion

4.1 In order to make sense of the coexistence of social mobility and social inequality, this paper draws on the narratives of seventy-three middle-class respondents to illustrate pacifying effects of social mobility. According to Parkin (1971), the socially mobile would come to re-define themselves, implying that they might also adopt a new worldview, including holding a new view on social inequality; with such pacifying effects, social mobility could be seen as a source of stability of the existing social and political order. This understanding of pacifying effects of social mobility is somehow consistent with a so-called orthodox view on 'class identity' but is rather mechanistic and simplistic. Just as Savage and his associates (2001: 890) demonstrate the ambivalent nature of class identities and argue that class and individual identities are not simply a formulation of either individualisation or that of social determination, so in this paper I also show pacifying effects of social mobility could operate through a sense of ambivalence. Viewing mobility as part of identity formation process, I sought to examine how my respondents made sense of their relocation and to explore how a sense of ambivalence operated in their stories of (re)location.

4.2 Against a rapidly changing colonial context, my respondents, unlike its western counterparts, were the very first batch of people taking up newly emerging middle-class positions in post-war Hong Kong. In a sense, they did not have any so-called class baggage. Yet, class provided them with clear anchor points in their narratives. My respondents were not ambivalent about how to position themselves: they admitted upfront that by occupation they were then in the middle class. But it remains to be seen whether they will exploit strategy to avoid social fixing (Savage et al 2001) or deploy multiple strategies to demonstrate their class distinction (Bourdieu 1984) when the class structure in Hong Kong becomes more established and institutionalised. What was crystal clear was that the respondents were very proud of their achievements as well as relocation and that their sense of pride did not accompany any touch of guilt, shame, or anxiety. Given the visibility of my respondents' successes, together with those of many other baby-boomers, an achievement ideology in the form of the so-called 'Hong Kong dream' emerged around the late 1980s. Whereas my respondents were not ambivalent about their relocation and class position, a sense of ambivalence was detected in their views on the 'Hong Kong dream.' Their ambivalence could certainly be seen as proof that my respondents are being contradictory; but it is somehow coherent in its own term. Their own successes led them to embrace the 'Hong Kong dream' and they took their siblings' failures as its validations. It was true that their sympathy for their parents betrayed their reservations about the 'Hong Kong dream' and their anxiety about their children's future revealed their genuine doubts about it. However, their ambivalence actually serves as a strategy to show that my respondents are individuals deserving a middle-class position because they are capable and industrious; at the same time, they are not arrogant but sympathetic middle-class members who would understand people's plight due to structural constraints and they are also caring and thoughtful parents anxious about their children's future. In this sense, pacifying effects of social mobility do not require the socially mobile to have an unambiguous class identity or embrace unequivocally a particular achievement ideology; instead, room for ambivalence is actually allowed. Yet, this remark is only tentative. The illustration reported here was about the first-generation middle class in Hong Kong. Whether the illustration here could still be of relevance in subsequent generations in Hong Kong or whether it could be found in other newly industrialising societies is open to further empirical examinations.

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Notes

[1] It was funded in the form of J.K. Swire Memorial Scholarship 1995-1998.

[2] Setting one selection criterion that respondents should have at least one child aged six or above, I sought to examine the strategies of respondents as parents for their children's education. But this criterion is not of major relevance to this paper.

[3] In Hong Kong of the early 1960s, only 5.8% of the population were clerical and related workers (Hong Kong Census Statistics Department 1961); a white-collar job was relatively privileged and well-paid.

[4] Class IVa, small employers, have the advantages of some amount of capital and also of a high degree of autonomy, although the economic security and prospects are generally less predictable than salaried employees.

[5] Statistics on the employment and educational attainment of the population reported below are from Hong Kong Census Statistics Department.

[6] All names in this paper are fictitious.

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